

THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE
Author of "Caleb Conover, Railroad-
er," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's
Trail," etc.
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Terhune

(Continued from Page 8.)

turned Desree. "I seem to be in a
fortress where no ill can ever get to
me. I'm home!"

He wrapped the coat more closely
about him and held her tenderly as a
mother, reverently as a priest might
near the Host. And after a time, as
one lay against his broad breast, the
long curling fringe of her eyelashes be-
gan to quiver. Sleepily she lifted her
face.

"Kiss me good night," she said, her
voice slow with drowsiness.
The fire died down and the ring of
heat-ramparts it had reared against the
autumn cold crumbled away. The
sleeping girl rested cozily warm in
Conover's arms. The faint, his back
against the tree, sat motionless, fear-
ing by the slightest move to disturb
her sleep.

He dared not rise to replenish the
smoldering fire. He was conscious
and the growing cold gnawed with in-
creasing keenness through the thin
negligee shirt, into his arms and
shoulders. It was the coldest night he
had known since his arrival at the
Adirondacks.

As the last flame died down upon the
logs of red-pine, Caleb Conover, with
a quiver of chilliness, crept close to the
embers and lay down again. Caleb,
first making sure the movement had
not disturbed Desree, fell to envying
the dog. The little into the night
very bones. The impossibility of shift-
ing his stilled position galled him, as
the endless hours crept by. Cramped,
half frozen, racked with the agony of
stiffening muscles and of blood that
could no longer circulate, he clenched
his teeth over his underlip from sheer
pain. The girl, who had been so
feather-like in his arms, now seemed
heavy enough to tear loose his throbbing
limbs. Nor would he, for all the
physical anguish of his plight, move
his body one hair's breadth.

And so, like a sleepless Gahadiah
before some old world forest shrine, like
Sisyphus on his pillar—worshipping up
his infinite suffering—he sat the long
night through.

At length his body grew numb, his
blood congested. Aching discomfort
and cold had wrought the worst of
his frame of iron and had left it hard-
ly impervious to further ill. His
mind, when bodily succor came, awoke
to new activity. His thoughts, at
first dazed and wondering, grew
happy, settled down soon to their
wondering sharp clearness. Then it was
he coolly weighed this thing he had
done.

It was like him to array in battle-
order all the contrary arguments of
the case, that he might force his
domination he might batter them to
pieces. And a long array they were.

First, his own social yearnings, his
golden dreams of a secure place within
the inner charmed circle of Granite
society. The only road of ingress had
been through marriage with a daughter
of that circle. Preferably with
Lettie Standish. Now all that was out
of the question. Desree herself was
popular. But he knew she could not
draw up to social prominence a man
like himself. She had not family nor
other prestige for such a tremendous
lift. Now as she himself had said,
did she value such position?

Had she married Howard, Calne or
any of a half dozen other eligible Gran-
ite men, Desree's own place in society
would straightaway have become more
than assured. With Conover as a
husband, she must take rank—or lack
of rank—with him. Nothing higher
could be in store for her. Forever
Caleb must assail the circle in vain,
or else sink back content with his own
lot far outside its fringe.

The very fact that he was married,
—and married to an outsider who
would not second his attack—would
render the walls of society impregna-
ble against him. As a single man,
with money and with the power to use
the money as a battering ram, he had
already knocked great breaches in the
fortifications. Now he could not
pass triumphantly through those gaps.

A life-ambition, all compelling even
in adversity of a strong man, would
fully to be foregone. He, who had
ever fought with all that was within
him for the gratification of his few
desires, must now forever abandon the
earliest and greatest of them all. On
the very eve of his career's most com-
plete victory he must forever lay aside
the sword.

Something like a sigh broke from
between his blue-cold lips. The sound
made the girl stir ever so slightly in
her sleep. Caleb glanced down in
alarm, dreading lest he had broken her
slumber. There, against his arm
rested Desree's upturned face. The
dark, silken lashes lay peacefully above
the sleep-furrowed cheeks. She was so
little, so helpless, so wonderful, to the
eyes bending above her! Inexpress-
ible precious to him always; a thou-
sand-fold more so now, in the hour of
his renunciation of all else for love of
her.

A wave of undreamed-of tenderness
swept over Conover, possessing him to
the utter extinction of every other
thought of passion; sweeping away in
its headlong rush all vestige of doubts
and regrets. In an instant of blinding
soul-light he saw once and for all the
futility of what he had abandoned; the
God-given marvel of what he had won
in its place.

The battle was over. Caleb Conover
had lost—and won. In his heart he
knew he was no longer the Fighter; no
more a seeker for Dead-End Fruit.
His battles, social and financial, were
at an end. This coming clash at the
Legislature, this mission on which
Desree was depending him, this true
light to save the fortunes of others—
should be his last field. After that,
a new, strange peace—and Desree!

Defiantly, Conover glanced out into
the night, beyond the smoking remnant
of the fire; as though challenging the
ghosts of slain ambitions to rise again
before him. He might confound them
all by merely pointing at the girl who
slept in his arms. She—the mere
sight of her—should be his reply to
their taunts.

Something in his own look or attitude
stirred a latent chord of memory. He
recalled, by an odd turn of thought,
a double-page drawing in one of the
English weeklies that he had long ago
seen at Desree's.

A rocky hillock whereon sat a man
and in his arms an unconscious
woman whose long hair streamed
over her loose robe;—confronting the
twain a shadowy, armed goddess into
whose commanding eyes the skin-clad
man was staring with an awed courage
born of desperation. Beneath the
picture were the lines:

"So gruss!—Mr. Walthall! Grusse mir
Walthall! Grusse mir Walthall und alle
Heiden! Zu ihnen folge ich dir nicht!"

Desree had translated the words for
Caleb. She had told him the picture
was of Siegmund; who, pausing in
his flight to a place of refuge, with
the fainting Siegmund whom he loved,
fought the Valkyrie. Brunhilde, and was
told by her that a hero's death and a
hero's reward in Valhalla were in store
for him. There in the Viking Paradise,
waited the warrior-parent he had lost;
there Wotan the All-Father would wel-
come him. The Valkyries were pre-
paring his place. The heroes of olden
days would be his comrades and
and Siegmund, the Luckless, heard
with joy. But one question he asked

the goddess:—Would Siegmund, his fel-
low fugitive, join him in the abode of
the blest? Brunhilde scoffingly replied
that Valhalla was for heroes, not for
men women. Then, unflinchingly
casting aside his every hope of Para-
dise, Siegmund kissed the senseless
woman's brow, and again facing the
goddess, made answer:

"Greet for me Valhalla! Greet for
me Wotan! Greet for me my father
and all the heroes! To them, I'll fol-
low these not! Where Siegmund bides,
there shall Siegmund stay."

Caleb at the time had been but mid-
lingly interested in the tale. The fact that
Desree could translate such queer
looking words was to him the most
noteworthy feature of the whole affair.
Now, with a whimsical comparison to
his own case, the incident recurred to
him.

Was he not, like Siegmund, keeping
watch and ward in the wilderness over
the unconscious woman of his heart?
Was not the Brunhilde of ambition
standing there somewhere in the mystic
star-shadows before him, pointing
out all that might be his, were he to
renounce love? And was he not mak-
ing reply as defiantly, if perhaps not
in quite such highflown terms, as had
that weird chap in the bearskin
clothes?

The idea tickled Conover's torpid
imagination; he dwelt upon it with
some pride at his own powers of anal-
ogy. Then he fell to dreaming of his
vast new happiness, of the golden vista
that stretched before him and Desree.
And again a wonder, almost holy, filled
his heart.

The night voices ceased. Brunhilde,
piqued at such unwonted obstinacy
from one who had ever hectoring been
over her, had scuttled back to Val-
halla in a fine fit of rage; leaving this
latter day Siegmund and Siegmund to
their own foolish, self-chosen fate.
The cold pressed more and more
cruelly as the night waned. It pierced
at times through Caleb's numbness.
He had great ado to keep his teeth
from chattering so loudly as to wake
the exhausted girl on his breast. The
stars grew dim. The dawn wind
breathed across the sky. A loneliness
of the eastern horizon of the fog-sea.
The man's heavy head nodded;—one—and again, then hung still.

With a sensation of being stared at,
Caleb Conover opened his eyes. The
pale shimmer in the east had given
place to gray dawn. The dawn-mind,
too, had waxed stronger; sweeping the
fog before it. No longer were the
man and woman on an island; but on
a hill top whence on every side stretch-
ed away leagues of dull green land-
scape. Only over the pond did the
mist still hover. Directly below, not
a quarter mile away, lay the camp.

Nor were they alone on their pen-
der-hill. On the far side of the dead
fire Jack Hawarden stood eyeing them.
And his face was as gray and as life-
less as the strewn ashes at his feet.

Conover and the lad looked at each
other without speaking. Long and
expressionless Jack gazed at the
waking and the sleeping. Conover
noted that the boy's eyes were hag-
gard and that the youth and jollity
had been stricken from his face as by
a blow. It was Hawarden who spoke
first:

(To be Continued.)

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